Don't Button Your Coat Yet

His departure doesn't have to end their story



Laura Bellini

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ROMANS

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INTRO

Silence in the film archive was never absolute. Even after the reading room had closed and the lights in the screening room had been switched off, something continued to work behind the walls: the ventilation system, an old clock, heating pipes, sometimes the metallic crack of a machine cooling down. I liked this time of evening. I no longer had to answer questions about catalogue references, listen to phone calls from the administration office, or pretend to be interested in someone else's priorities. For a few hours, I could imagine the entire place belonged to me.

That evening, I had something more important to do than organise another batch of catalogue cards. A grant application for a series of screenings was waiting on my computer. I had been working on it for three months. I wanted to bring together short silent films from the Łódź collections, not according to their dates or directors' names, but around the places that were slowly disappearing from the city: courtyards, factories, small railway stations, dance halls. Each screening would have its own story, and for the first time, I wanted to be responsible for the entire programme, not merely the descriptions, envelopes and decisions made by other people. In the box marked "Coordinator", I had entered my own name. I stared at it longer than was sensible.

The deadline was nine the following morning. I still had a few sentences of justification to write and a budget that stubbornly refused to balance. I had already opened the submission form when I heard the sound of metal being dragged somewhere in the back rooms. My fingers froze

above the keyboard. There shouldn't have been anyone there at that hour.

I picked up a flashlight and went down to the storage room beside the old projection booth. A crate stood on the table, one I hadn't seen before. It was narrow, made of dark wood, with brass corners and a label attached so carefully that it looked as though someone had wanted it to survive another fifty years. The label bore an archival collection number I didn't recognise and a note stating that the material had no title. The crate must have arrived that day, but nobody had left me any information about it.

I ran my finger over the layer of dust. Beneath it, a thin line appeared, like a mark left by a fingernail. I knew this type of packaging. There could be film inside, documentation or empty reels, but the way it had been secured suggested that someone had once considered its contents worth taking particular care of. I opened the incoming materials register on my work tablet. The entry was brief: "Film material, private donation, pending verification." No donor's name. No description. No report on its condition.

"You shouldn't open that by yourself."

The voice came from behind me. I turned sharply, and the flashlight beam cut through the darkness before settling on a man standing in the doorway. He wore a dark coat, unbuttoned despite the cold, and carried a leather tool bag. He didn't look like someone who had wandered in by mistake. He looked more like a man who had known exactly where he was going for quite some time and wasn't accustomed to explaining his presence.

"And you shouldn't enter the storage room without reporting your arrival," I replied.

For a moment, we simply looked at each other. He didn't smile, but something in his expression suggested amusement. His eyes were calm, and his hands belonged to someone accustomed to precise work. I noticed a few traces of grease near the cuff of his shirt before I remembered that I hadn't intended to meet anyone that evening.

"Roch Kania. Equipment and film conservation," he introduced himself, setting his bag down on an empty section of the table. "I received a message about the crate."

"I didn't."

"This isn't the first time information has reached this place in the wrong order."

He said it without sarcasm, as though describing a fault that could be repaired if only someone stopped pretending it didn't exist. I didn't particularly like the fact that I immediately wanted to answer him with something equally sharp.

"Ina Brzoza. I handle the registration and cataloguing of materials. Until there's a condition report, the crate stays closed."

"Agreed. But before anyone opens it, we need to check the storage conditions and the state of the packaging. If there's nitrocellulose inside, rushing things would be a very bad idea."

He didn't raise his voice or attempt to take the decision away from me. Even so, his words sounded like a correction added to my plan without asking permission. I looked at the crate, then at the screen of my tablet. The entry didn't even specify what kind of film stock we were dealing with. He was right, and I had no intention of making it easy for him to say so.

"In that case, please prepare your recommendations. Tomorrow morning."

"Tomorrow morning might be too late if the crate was previously stored in unsuitable conditions."

"And if we start acting without documentation, we'll end up with a problem much bigger than the crate."

This time he actually smiled, briefly, as though he appreciated the fact that I hadn't backed down simply because he'd adopted a professional tone. He placed his gloves beside the bag and examined the label without touching it.

"I'm not suggesting we open it. I'm suggesting we examine it together and record everything we can establish without disturbing the seals."

Together.

The word sounded surprisingly ordinary. As though working together were the most obvious solution, even though a few moments earlier I hadn't known this man existed. I thought about the application waiting on my screen, the unfinished budget and the fact that I was supposed to present my own programme to the management the following day. I didn't want someone else's project to consume the time I was trying so hard to reclaim for myself.

"I still have something to finish tonight," I said.

"I can see that."

I followed his gaze. The submission form was still open on my tablet, and a printed copy of my schedule lay beside it. He didn't try to read the details. One glance was enough for him to understand that he hadn't walked into an empty

storage room. He had interrupted someone whose evening already had a purpose of its own.

"I don't intend to keep you here," he said. "But this crate won't wait for a more convenient time."

There was no pressure in his voice. That was precisely what made him harder to dismiss. He could simply have carried out his assignment, left me his recommendations and gone. Instead, he waited, leaving the decision to me. I noticed that he wasn't looking down on me, even though he clearly had the advantage of knowing more about the matter that had suddenly appeared between us. That was rare. And annoyingly attractive.

I turned off the tablet screen but didn't put it away. The application could wait another fifteen minutes. Not the whole night, not until the following day. Just fifteen minutes. That was all I was willing to give without abandoning my own plans.

"We'll examine the crate," I decided. "No opening it and no experiments conducted independently. We document everything."

"Agreed."

He reached out, but not to insist on a handshake. He was merely pointing towards the flashlight, whose beam was beginning to weaken.

"Do you have spare batteries?"

"In the drawer by the entrance."

"Good. I have a habit of working with light that doesn't go out halfway through a sentence."

"And I have a habit of not trusting people who start correcting my plans the moment we meet."

"Reasonable," he replied. "Then don't trust me. Check whether I'm right."

I headed towards the entrance to fetch the batteries, feeling that my carefully organised evening had just taken a different shape. I still didn't know what was inside the crate or why someone had donated an untitled film to the archive without providing a name. All I knew was that Roch Kania had no intention of pretending everything could be done my way, and I had no intention of handing him control. When I returned, he was standing beside the table, waiting without touching anything.

My application was still open. My plan still belonged to me. And yet, for the first time in a long while, I wondered whether not every change of direction had to mean losing control.

Could I let him into this one unexpected moment without giving him the right to decide which way I should go?

Chapter 1 - The Image That Wasn't in the Catalogue

The following morning, I arrived at the archive twenty minutes before the start of the working day. Not because I had suddenly developed a fondness for early mornings, but because I wanted to examine the crate's documentation before Roch arrived. The previous evening, we had managed to prepare a preliminary description of the packaging, measure its dimensions and check the visible markings. We hadn't opened it. As agreed, we had left the seals intact, and I had entered a note in the register stating that a joint assessment of the material's condition would be required.

Over my morning coffee, I read through all the available information once again. Private donation. Film material. No title. No donor's name on the basic form. In the section concerning the object's history, someone had entered just one sentence: "Found while clearing out utility rooms." That was nowhere near enough to consider the documentation complete, but it was sufficient to initiate the verification procedure.

At half past eight, a folder containing the transfer documents appeared on my desk. Marta, the head of the archive, had brought it in. After working with me for years, she had developed an uncanny ability to recognise my displeasure from the way I put down my pen.

"I see our new delivery has already managed to irritate you."

"Not yet. I'm giving it a chance."

"Wise. Apparently, it's something interesting."

I opened the folder and went through the first few pages. The transfer had been arranged with a private individual whose name was known to the administration, but the documentation available to staff contained no detailed contact information. There was no complete description of the contents either. What I did find was an attachment concerning the planned use of the material in the archive's activities. It mentioned the possibility of organising a public screening once the technical and historical assessments had been completed.

"Do you know who the donor is?" I asked.

"I know the director handled the formalities. Apparently, the family was clearing out a relative's flat."

"And nobody thought to ask where the film came from?"

"I think that's precisely why we've been given this folder."

I wasn't particularly pleased, but I couldn't deny she had a point. In an archive, we often started with incomplete information. Our job was to establish what was actually held in the collections, not take offence because people didn't have all the answers.

At nine, Roch walked into the workshop carrying a cup of coffee and a tool bag. This time, his coat wasn't unbuttoned. He took it off by the door and hung it on the coat rack, as though he had known from the beginning that he would be staying for a while.

"Good morning," he said.

"Good morning. I've prepared the documentation."

"And I've brought the equipment for assessing the packaging. It seems we're both well organised."

"Don't get used to it. It might be a one-off."

He glanced at me with a smile he made no attempt to conceal. Then he placed his bag on the table and took out several measuring instruments. He didn't rush. He arranged the tools in a precise order, checking their condition as he went, while I watched him for a moment before returning to the documents.

There was something about the way he worked that inspired confidence, although I wasn't ready to admit it yet. He didn't try to impress me with his knowledge. He didn't bombard me with technical terminology. He simply knew what needed to be done and didn't pretend to know more than the available evidence allowed.

"Before we start," I said, "we need to agree on how we're going to document everything."

"Go ahead."

"Every action involving the material will be recorded. We won't make any decisions about cleaning, repairs or projection without a joint assessment. If we find more than one component, we won't change their order. And we won't conduct any tests on the original without a proper justification."

"Agreed."

"Just like that?"

"Would you prefer me to argue?"

"I'd prefer us not to have to argue later."

"Then we have a common interest."

We signed the work commencement report. Then we moved the crate to the prepared workstation. The room was cool, equipped with suitable lighting and the necessary

equipment to control working conditions. For several minutes, we examined the surface of the packaging, its corners and the points where the different sections joined. Roch indicated each area in turn, and I recorded the findings.

"There's evidence of previous opening here," he observed, pointing to one of the metal strips.

"I don't see any damage to the seal."

"Not now. But someone might have removed this part before."

I looked more closely. He was right. One of the screws had a small scratch on it. It didn't look accidental.

"We'll add it to the description," I decided. "Without drawing conclusions we can't substantiate."

"That's exactly the answer I was hoping for."

"I'm not sure whether I should feel flattered."

"You should feel reassured. That's much more useful."

Once the preliminary assessment was complete, we were able to proceed with opening the crate. We documented each stage separately. The fastenings gave way slowly, and I checked for any signs of damage as we worked. Inside were two metal film cans, wrapped in paper and separated by a layer of soft protective material. Beside them lay a small envelope.

There was no name on it. Just a handwritten note: "To be kept with the film."

"That's interesting," I said.

Roch didn't reach for the envelope.

"The cans first. Let's see what we've got."

Following the procedure, we examined the markings and the condition of the containers. One of the cans was empty. The other held a film reel whose markings didn't allow us to determine its date or type with any certainty. It didn't look like a modern copy. The writing on the label was partly rubbed away, but a few letters and numbers were still legible.

"Twenty-eight?" I asked.

"Possibly. But I wouldn't enter that in the documentation as the production date just yet."

"I wasn't planning to."

"Good. I'm beginning to enjoy this collaboration."

"Careful. We haven't established whether it'll last beyond lunchtime."

Once we had prepared the workstation for further examination, Roch checked the condition of the film's perforations and edges. He never touched the material directly, working with gloves and the appropriate tools. I read out the markings, comparing them with the catalogues available to us. After a while, it became clear that we couldn't assign the material to any of the documented collections.

"It's not in our databases," I said.

"That isn't particularly surprising."

"Thank you for the reassurance."

"I wasn't trying to reassure you. I meant that the absence of an entry doesn't necessarily mean the film is unknown."

I looked at him more carefully.

"What do you mean?"

"It might have been kept outside an institution. Someone might have made a copy that never found its way into a catalogue. The markings could refer to an earlier owner rather than the place where it was produced."

"Or it could be material that simply can't be identified."

"That's possible too."

He didn't try to impose a single interpretation. I liked that more than I probably should have.

Over the next few minutes, we established that the reel contained silent film footage and appeared to be long enough for a short screening, although a final decision would require us to examine the entire reel. Before proceeding with anything else, however, we returned to the envelope. Inside was a single sheet of paper bearing a short sentence: "Do not separate from the image."

I read it twice.

"That's not a technical description," I observed.

"But it might be a clue to its origins."

"Or someone's personal request."

"Then it's worth keeping with the material."

"Of course."

I placed the note in an appropriate protective sleeve and created a separate entry for it. I didn't know why someone had decided that this particular scrap of paper needed to remain with the film. I didn't know whether it had historical significance or was simply something of emotional importance. I wasn't going to remove it just because I couldn't yet explain why it was there.

By the afternoon, we had a preliminary understanding of the situation. The material required further examination, but nothing suggested that its condition would prevent us from working with it. That was when I returned to the matter that had been on my mind since the morning.

"I'd like to propose a screening," I said.

Roch looked up from his notes.

"Already?"

"Not tomorrow. Not next week. I'd like to develop a concept and present it to the management. The film we've found could become part of a programme devoted to the disappearing places of Łódź."

"We don't know what's on it yet."

"That's why I'm talking about a concept, not a finished screening."

"And what if the material isn't suitable for projection?"

"Then we'll change the way we present it. We could show excerpts from the documentation and talk about the identification process."

"I wouldn't want us to treat the film as an excuse to organise an event before we know what we actually have."

I felt the conversation shifting in a direction I hadn't anticipated.

"I'm not treating it as an excuse."

"I'm not saying you are. I'm saying we need to be careful."

"I know what the archive does, Roch."

"I don't doubt that. But if we announce a screening, people will start expecting a specific date. And we don't

even know whether we have material that's safe to work with."

"I'm not going to promise a screening date before the technical assessment is complete."

"Then what do you need from me?"

His question was calm, but it left no room for vague answers.

I took a printout of my project from the folder. I hadn't intended to show it to the management just yet, but I decided Roch should understand why I was so determined not to let the film end up as another anonymous object in storage.

"I'm working on a programme that tells the story of Łódź through images of places that no longer exist. I don't want another screening made up of random excerpts from newsreels. I want to create something meaningful for the people who live here. This film could fit into that concept, provided its contents confirm our initial hypothesis."

He went through the printout in silence. He didn't rush, and he didn't skip pages. He stopped at the description of one of the planned screenings.

"Is this your project?"

"Yes."

"You prepared it yourself?"

"From the beginning."

"And you're planning to present it?"

"Tomorrow."

He handed the pages back to me.

"Then I understand why you're in a hurry."

He didn't tell me my idea was good. He didn't promise that everything would work out. He simply acknowledged that I had a reason, one he wasn't going to dismiss.

"But I still don't think we should set a screening date," he added.

"I didn't ask you for a date."

"Then let me ask for one thing. Before we present this film to the public, let's allow it to show us what it actually contains."

I looked at him. There was no condescension in his voice. Just professional responsibility that extended beyond completing an assignment. And something else, harder to define. A kind of patience that was missing in many of the people I worked with.

"All right," I said. "But I have one condition too."

"I'm listening."

"We won't postpone the decision indefinitely. We'll establish a schedule for the assessment, and then present the management with concrete possibilities."

"That sounds reasonable."

"Don't get used to it."

This time, he laughed softly.

As we finished work, I entered the next tasks into the schedule and specified deadlines I had no intention of exceeding. Roch accepted most of them, but he stopped with his pen over one particular item.

"I can't promise this one."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't know whether I'll be available then."

"Do you have other assignments?"

"I have a few things I need to sort out."

He didn't elaborate. I had no reason to press him, although his answer sounded more personal than I had expected.

I closed the folder.

"In that case, I'll mark the date as subject to confirmation."

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me. It's just work organisation."

"Sometimes organising the work is the hardest part of the whole undertaking."

When he left the workshop, I stayed by the table for a while. I looked at the empty film can, the handwritten note and the project I was supposed to present to the management the following day. Three different things that had unexpectedly ended up beside one another.

I still had no idea what story the film concealed. But I knew Roch Kania wasn't someone who would agree with me just to keep the peace. And perhaps that was precisely why I wanted him to return to the archive the next day.

Chapter 2 - The Terms of Collaboration

The following day, my project faced its first real test. I hadn't received approval to put it into production, but Marta considered the idea worth presenting to the programme committee. I still needed to refine the budget and identify specific materials that could be included in the series. The newly discovered film was one possibility, although I had no intention of making the entire project depend on it.

After the meeting with the management, I returned to the workshop with a notebook full of comments and suggestions. The most important ones concerned the schedule. If I wanted to submit the programme for the next stage of consideration, I had to provide an initial list of materials and the people responsible for working on them. That meant my collaboration with Roch needed to take on a more concrete form.

I found him in the technical room. He was checking one of the old projectors that was supposed to be used during the trials. He stood bent over the machine, his sleeves rolled up to his elbows. On the table beside him, his tools were arranged so neatly that each seemed to have its own designated place.

"Have you got a moment?" I asked.

"Depends. Is it about the projector or something that can wait?"

"About our collaboration."

He put down the tool.

"That sounds more serious than the projector."

"Because it is. I need to establish the terms on which we'll be working on the film."

"I thought we'd already agreed on them."

"We agreed on how to handle the material. We haven't agreed on the scope of our responsibilities, deadlines or the way we'll make decisions."

"Fair enough."

He gestured towards a chair beside the table. I sat down, and he closed the projector casing before moving his tools aside. He didn't pretend the conversation was less important than the work he had interrupted. It was a small thing, but I appreciated it.

I took the document I'd prepared from my notebook.

"I'd like us to work in three stages. First, a complete assessment of the film's condition and its documentation. Then, identification of the contents, comparison with available materials and an attempt to establish possible sources. Finally, we'll decide how it might be presented, if presentation is possible at all."

"Sounds good."

"You'll be responsible for the technical assessment, I'll handle the archival and historical documentation. We'll prepare our conclusions together."

"Agreed. But I have one more point."

"Of course."

"I don't want us to assume from the outset that this material has to end up on a screen. If we establish that the safest option is to limit ourselves to presenting the documentation, we need to have that possibility."

"I'm not going to risk the original just for the sake of an impressive screening."

"Then we don't have a problem."

"We have one. Deadlines."

I pushed the document towards him. I had marked the dates for subsequent examinations and the expected deadline for presenting our preliminary report. Roch read the entire thing, then stopped at the last page.

"It says here that the decision about using the material belongs to the programme coordinator."

"Which means me."

"Exactly. And what happens if my technical assessment is negative?"

"Then we won't use the film for projection."

"Even if that means changing the entire programme?"

"Even then."

For a moment, he studied me carefully, as though checking whether I was simply saying what I thought would end the conversation. I didn't look away.

"Good," he said at last. "I wanted to hear that."

"Any other objections?"

"Not to this document. But I have a condition of my own."

"I'm listening."

"I want access to the complete documentation relating to the material, not just the technical assessment sheets. If we find something that could change how we should handle the film, I need to know about it."

"That's obvious."

"Not always."

I didn't answer immediately. I knew what he was referring to. In some institutions, technical staff were given only the limited information considered necessary to complete their assignments. The archivist made all the other decisions, and the conservator was expected not to ask questions. I'd never considered that a sensible way of working.

"You'll receive all the information about the material that's available in the documentation. If anything comes up that requires restricted access, we'll discuss it separately. I won't hide anything from you simply because it doesn't directly concern the condition of the film."

"All right."

He signed the document. I added my signature beside his. Officially, we were now the team responsible for assessing the newly discovered film.

We spent the rest of the morning working at the workstation. Roch prepared a summary of the technical parameters, while I organised the transfer documentation. It turned out that one of the attachments contained information about where the crate had been stored before being delivered to the archive. It was a private utility room somewhere in Łódź, but no exact address had been provided.

"That could help us," I said.

"With establishing the storage conditions?"

"And the object's history. If we know the location, we can try to find out whether the material belonged to a local collection."

"And if there's no additional information?"

"Then we'll keep looking."

Roch looked at me with a hint of amusement.

"Are you always this stubborn?"

"Only when someone asks unnecessary questions."

"That explains a few things."

"Like what?"

"I'm not telling you yet. I don't want to spoil my first official day of collaboration."

I tried to keep a straight face, but didn't quite manage it.

At noon, we took a break. I usually ate at my desk because working in an archive had a way of making something more urgent than lunch appear at any moment. This time, Roch suggested that we go out for coffee. He didn't say it in a way that implied I had no choice. He simply asked whether I had time.

"I have half an hour," I replied.

"That'll do."

"Depends on how quickly you drink your coffee."

"More slowly than I work."

We left the building and headed towards a small café I knew from my daily route to work. It was cold, but it wasn't raining. The street was still wet from the morning shower, and the cars left grey trails of water behind them. November in Łódź had a particular kind of light. Even at midday, the city could look as though the day had been drawing to a close for hours.

Roch walked beside me without trying to set the pace. At first, we talked about work. He asked how long I'd been involved with the archive, and I told him long enough to

know that not everything could be put in order in a catalogue.

"Why films in particular?" he asked.

"Because they allow you to see things nobody thought were worth describing."

"Such as?"

"People waiting at a bus stop. Someone looking out of a window. A child running across a courtyard. Sometimes the most important thing in a frame isn't what the person behind the camera intended to show."

"So you're interested in the incidental details."

"I'm interested in what remains after the original context disappears."

"That's a rather dangerous specialisation."

"Why?"

"Because you can start inventing a story for every little detail."

I glanced at him.

"And you don't try to do that?"

"I try not to confuse what I know with what I'd like to know."

He said it without a trace of irony. There was something calm in his voice that made me forget my prepared response for a moment. I realised he spoke about his work with more affection than I might have expected from someone who spent his days repairing equipment and assessing film stock.

"Have you been working with projectors for a long time?" I asked.